

“Though there are some political distinctions between the two prominent parties in the so-called U.S., they all pledge their allegiance to the same flag. Red or blue, they’re both still stripes on a rag waving over stolen lands that comprise a country built by stolen lives...We don’t dismiss the reality that, on the scale of U.S. settler colonial violence, even the slightest degree of harm can mean life or death for those most vulnerable. What we assert here is that the entire notion of “voting as harm reduction” obscures and perpetuates settler-colonial violence, there is nothing “less harmful” about it, and there are more effective ways to intervene in its violences.”

-Voting is Not Harm Reduction: An Indigenous Perspective

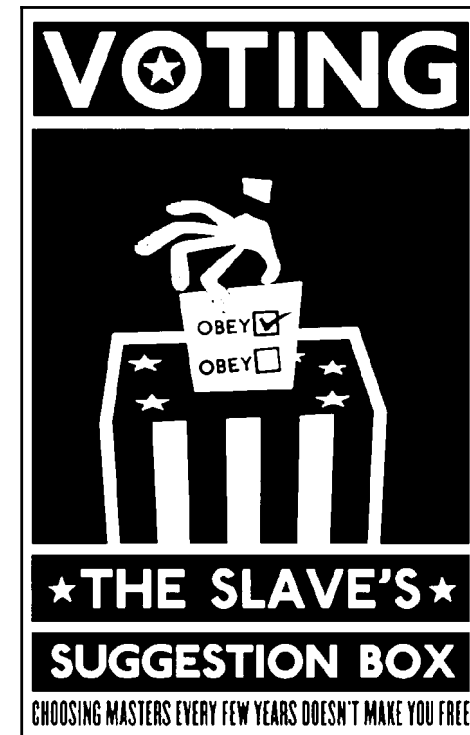
“To vote is to abdicate. To name one or several masters for a short or long period means renouncing one’s own sovereignty. Whether he becomes absolute monarch, constitutional prince or a simple elected representative bearing a small portion of royalty, the candidate you raise to the throne or the chair will be your superior. You name men who are above laws, since they write them and their mission is to make you obey.”

- On Voting

“Anarchists distinguish themselves by asserting a direct and unobstructed link between thought and action, between desires and their free fulfillment. We reject all societal processes that break that link—such as private property, exchange relations, division of labor, and democracy. We call that broken link alienation....anarchists are *anti-political*. We are not interested in a different claim to alienated power, in a different leadership, in another *form* of representation, in a regime change, or in anything that merely shuffles around the makeup of alienated power. Any time someone claims to represent you or to be your liberatory force, that should be a definite red flag. We are anti-political because we are interested in the self-organization of the power of individuals. This tension towards self-organization is completely orthogonal to democracy in any of its various forms.”

- An Anarchist Critique of Democracy

Why We Refuse



To Vote

An Anarchist Response to Critics

This zine was put together with the aim of shedding some light on why we feel that anarchism - the revolutionary idea that no one is more qualified than you are to decide what your life will be – is incompatible with voting.

Below are three (fairly short) essays that we feel best summarize an anarchist position against voting.

Voting is Not Harm Reduction

An Indigenous Perspective

(A Short Excerpt)

When proclamations are made that “voting is harm reduction,” it’s never clear how less harm is actually calculated. Do we compare how many millions of undocumented Indigenous Peoples have been deported? Do we add up what political party conducted more drone strikes? Or who had the highest military budget? Do we factor in pipelines, mines, dams, sacred sites desecration? Do we balance incarceration rates? Do we compare sexual violence statistics? Is it in the massive budgets of politicians who spend hundreds of millions of dollars competing for votes?

Though there are some political distinctions between the two prominent parties in the so-called U.S., they all pledge their allegiance to the same flag. Red or blue, they’re both still stripes on a rag waving over stolen lands that comprise a country built by stolen lives.

We don’t dismiss the reality that, on the scale of U.S. settler colonial violence, even the slightest degree of harm can mean life or death for those most vulnerable. What we assert here is that the entire notion of “voting as harm reduction” obscures and perpetuates settler-colonial violence, there is nothing “less harmful” about it, and there are more effective ways to intervene in its violences.

At some point the left in the so-called U.S. realized that convincing people to rally behind a “lesser evil” was a losing strategy. The term “harm reduction” was appropriated to reframe efforts to justify their participation and coerce others to engage in the theater of what is called “democracy” in the U.S.

Harm reduction was established in the 1980s as a public health strategy for people dealing with substance use issues who struggle with abstinence. According to the Harm Reduction Coalition (HRC) the principles of harm



VOTE!

Help the wealthy pick a spokesperson
to explain their decisions to us.



reduction establish that the identified behavior is “part of life” so they “choose not to ignore or condemn but to minimize harmful effects” and work towards breaking social stigmas towards “safer use.” The HRC also states that, “there is no universal definition of or formula for implementing harm reduction.” Overall, harm reduction focuses on reducing adverse impacts associated with harmful behaviors.

The proposition of “harm reduction” in the context of voting means something entirely different from those organizing to address substance use issues. The assertion is that “since this political system isn’t going away, we’ll support politicians and laws that may do less harm.”

The idea of a ballot being capable of reducing the harm in a system rooted in colonial domination and exploitation, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and capitalism is an extraordinary exaggeration. There is no person whose lives aren’t impacted everyday by these systems of oppression, but instead of coded reformism and coercive “get out the vote” campaigns towards a “safer” form of settler colonialism, we’re asking “what is the real and tragic harm and danger associated with perpetuating colonial power and what can be done to end it?”

Voting as practiced under U.S. “democracy” is the process with which people (excluding youth under the age of 18, convicted felons, those the state deems “mentally incompetent,” and undocumented folx including permanent legal residents), are coerced to choose narrowly prescribed rules and rulers. The anarchist collective Crimethinc observes, “Voting consolidates the power of a whole society in the hands of a few politicians.” When this process is conducted under colonial authority, there is no option but political death for Indigenous Peoples. In other words, voting can never be a survival strategy under colonial rule. It’s a strategy of defeat and victimhood that protracts the suffering and historical harm induced by ongoing settler colonialism. And while the harm reduction sentiment may be sincere, even hard won marginal reforms gained through popular support can be just as easily reversed by the stroke of a politician’s pen. If voting is the democratic participation in our own oppression, voting as harm reduction is a politics that keeps us at the mercy of our oppressors.

While so many on the left—including some Indigenous radicals—are concerned with consolidation of power into fascists hands, they fail to recognize how colonial power is already consolidated. There is nothing intersectional about participating in and maintaining a genocidal political system. There’s no meaningful solidarity to be found in a politics that urges us to meet our oppressors where they’re at. Voting as harm reduction imposes a false solidarity upon those identified to be most vulnerable to harmful political policies and actions. In practice it plays out as paternalistic identity politicking as liberals

work to identify the least dangerous candidates and rally to support their campaigns. The logic of voting as harm reduction asserts that whoever is facing the most harm will gain the most protection by the least dangerous denominator in a violently authoritarian system. This settler-colonial naivety places more people, non-human beings, and land at risk than otherwise. Most typically the same liberal activists that claim voting is harm reduction are found denouncing and attempting to suppress militant direct actions and sabotage as acts that “only harm our movement.” “Voting as harm reduction” is the pacifying language of those who police movements.

Voting as harm reduction is the government issued blanket of the democratic party, we’re either going to sleep or die in it.

On Voting

by **Elisée Reclus**

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Translated by Mitchell Abidor.

Compagnons:

You ask a man of good will, who is neither a voter nor a candidate, to reveal his ideas on the exercising of the right to suffrage.

You haven’t given me much time to answer, but since I have quite clear convictions on the subject of the electoral vote, what I have to say to you can be formulated in a few words.

To vote is to abdicate. To name one or several masters for a short or long period means renouncing one’s own sovereignty. Whether he becomes absolute monarch, constitutional prince or a simple elected representative bearing a small portion of royalty, the candidate you raise to the throne or the chair will be your superior. You name men who are above laws, since they write them and their mission is to make you obey.

To vote means being a dupe. It means believing that at the ringing of a bell men like you will suddenly acquire the virtue of knowing and understanding everything. Your elected representatives having to legislate on everything, from matches to warships, from the pruning of trees to the extermination of red or black villages, it seems to you that their intelligence grows thanks to the immensity of the task. History teaches you that that the contrary is the case. Power has always made mad, and speechifying makes stupid. It is inevitable that mediocrity prevails in sovereign assemblies.

determination. Those beliefs lead to many different visions of the world, but when genuinely held they will never lead to democracy. Even “direct democracy” demands surrender to the status quo that produces a hierarchy of group over individual, thus separating us from our desires and our desires from their unfettered realization in direct action. Any who would give up these principles should also give up the name “anarchist”—perhaps in favor of “libertarian.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is easy to see that in its promotion of alienation, its reduction of ideas to opinions, its demand of decontextualized decision making, its basis of “majority rule,” its necessity to reproduce itself as a system, and its susceptibility to demagoguery, democracy has very serious problems and falls far short of the freedom that it claims to represent. These are not problems with various ways that democracy is implemented, but are endemic to the democratic process itself.

Unlike political parties, it is easy to see why anarchists (who are not interested in leveraging these shortcomings for our own advantage) reject democracy entirely.



When we swallow the government's bait by voting, we give them the power to reel in our potential to take control over our own lives in their full breadth and scope. Elections tend to put people into passive mode, to offer salvation through belief in majority wisdom rather than through self-directed action. A division between leaders and followers develops where voters stand aside as spectators of their own government, not agents in their own right. Political systems of all types exclude the opportunity for direct action, but democracy's insidious ability to reproduce itself as a restrictive system while continuously incorporating more people into its "let freedom ring" rhetoric makes it especially sneaky.

Democracy Is Only A Single Component Of Our Lives

Formal political organization addresses only certain aspects of material reality, and so democracy does not wholly determine our right to self-determination. For instance, whatever freedoms one feels one has under a democratic government on the street do not extend into the workplace. Minimum wages, maximum hours, safety conditions and other regulatory statutes enacted via the government under pressure from direct action and grassroots campaigns might improve work conditions and prohibit specific abuses. Nevertheless, the employer and employee do not interact as two democratic equals. One has the role of boss, the other worker, and both pay with their lives in a sense for those roles—but another election will not change that.

Democracy only exists as a part of our total experience. When accompanied by capitalism as an economic system, we come face to face with another set of difficulties as well. We have already pointed out how democracy mediates the actions of individuals, but the *resulting* action of state managers or referenda can fail in similar ways. Because in truth, the ruling class of capitalists controls the processes of democracy with certain pressures that are not overtly acknowledged as being a part of the democratic process, and which are certainly "undemocratic." This makes so-called "progressive" legislation very difficult, because progressive actions are usually hostile to the capitalist class, and will provoke very specific responses in the economic sector. This has happened time and time again in all major democratic states, and most significantly in South America and the United Kingdom. In the words of Jaques Camatte, "The specialist has become a bird of prey, the bureaucrat a miserable boot-licker."

Direct Democracy Isn't Anarchy, You Fucks

We hope that we have proved that majoritarianism of any sort means the repression of individual liberties and the curtailment of direct action in favor of deferred decision-making. For that reason, the number of websites and amount of material which proclaim that anarchists desire direct democracy came as some surprise to us while researching this critique. Anarchists believe in unmediated relations between free individuals, the absence of any coercive or alienating forces in societies, and an unquestionable, universal right to self-

To vote means evoking treason. Voters doubtless believe in the honesty of those to whom they grant their votes, and they are perhaps right the first day, when the candidates are still in the throes of their first love. But every day has its tomorrow. As soon as the setting changes, men change with it. Today the candidate bows before you, and perhaps too deeply. Tomorrow he will stand upright, and perhaps too tall. He begged for votes and he will give you orders. When a worker becomes a supervisor can he remain what he was before obtaining the boss' favor? Doesn't the fiery democrat learn to bow his head when the banker deigns to invite him to his office, when the king's valets do him the honor of conversing with him in the antechambers? The atmosphere of these legislative bodies is unhealthy: you are sending your representatives into a corrupting milieu. Don't be surprised that they leave it corrupted.

So don't abdicate, don't place your fate in the hands of men who are necessarily lacking in capability and future traitors. Don't vote! Instead of trusting your interests to others, defend them yourselves. Instead of hiring lawyers to propose a future mode of action, act! Occasions aren't lacking for men of good will. To place upon others the responsibility for one's own conduct means to be lacking in valor.

I salute you with all my heart, comrades.
Elisée Reclus

An Anarchist Critique of Democracy

by Moxie Marlinspike and Windy Hart

We decided to compile this critique of democracy because we recognize an inherent tension between democracy and the freedom of individuals to create their own lives as they see fit. Some of the problems we find with democracy have been acknowledged by defenders of democracy as well, but have only led to the development of amended types of democracies (as various thinkers tried to prune the concept into an acceptable shape). By contrast, our analysis has led us to abandon the concept altogether, because we find some fundamental faults with the idea *itself* that can not be reconciled by new modifications or reforms. Our critique is of democracy in *all* its various forms, whether representative or direct. We are not echoing confused cries for *more* democracy, we are calling for its entire abolition.

In this installment, we'll investigate the concept of alienation and how democracy promotes it. We'll question the logic of decontextualized decision making, the reduction of ideas to opinions, and the near-universal acceptance of "majority rule." We'll also go over a few immanent critiques of democracy involving demagoguery, lobbying, and corruption that are more readily accepted

even by defenders of democracy, and then we'll talk about why democracy is so good at maintaining and reproducing itself.

Definition Of Democracy

To start, we offer a definition of what we are critiquing. Democracy is a theory of government where the law reflects the will of the majority as determined by direct vote or elected representatives. Typically, the legitimacy of a democracy begins with the adoption of a constitution, which establishes the fundamental rules, principles, duties, and powers of the government and some set of rights for individuals against those of the government. The enumeration of rights attempts to protect individuals from the whims of a democratic majority, a concept developed under republicanism during the overthrow of monarchism.

Alienation

First, alienation. To begin our critique of democracy, we start by talking about the more general anarchist critique of alienation.

Anarchists distinguish themselves by asserting a direct and unobstructed link between thought and action, between desires and their free fulfillment. We reject all societal processes that break that link—such as private property, exchange relations, division of labor, and democracy. We call that broken link alienation.

Passions and desires can only be a delight when they are real and definite forces in our lives. In this condition of alienation, however, they are inevitably muted by the knowledge that the conditions of our existence are not under our control. In this context, dreams are only for dreamers, because our desires are constantly faced with the impossibility of action. In this sinister way, when we lose our connection with the desires and passions that drive us forward, it is impossible to wrest back control of our lives and we are left to linger in a condition of passivity. Even the desire to change the material and societal conditions that function on alienation is met with this passivity and hopelessness, essentially leaving them intact.

Society thus ends up divided into the alienated, whose capacity to create their own lives as they see fit has been taken from them, and those in control of these processes, who benefit from this separation by accumulating and controlling alienated energy in order to reproduce the current society and their own role as its rulers. Most of us fall into the former category, while people like landlords, bosses, and politicians compose the latter.

So at heart, we are against democracy because its very existence maintains this division that we're seeking to abolish. Democracy does nothing but maintain the

must not truly oppress people. Clearly, this train of thought has not, does not and will never transport us to a genuinely free and equal society.

Yet rejecting this logic without adopting a more general critique of democracy leads us to another suspicious conclusion often voiced by progressive, liberal factions in the United States. It sounds to the tune of, our government fails us because we the people are too apathetic, or too unaware, or too stupid, or too anything at all to yield our immense power as we ought. If we progressives could only mobilize, inform, or educate the public, then everything would work out beautifully. And so one sees presumably intelligent people tying themselves in knots, trying to reform a system that in its best and most functional form can only hope to oppress everyone, equally, an equal percentage of the time. Again, the ruling class can rest easy as long as we place the blame on ourselves and not them for our alienated position in modern society and that will continue until we realize the intrinsic flaws in the concept of democracy itself and refuse to reproduce it.

We reproduce democracy by supporting it with our vote and our daily subservience to the outcome of elections. If you understand that democracy will never let you act outside its narrow parameters and you accept our critique of majority rule, then voting and elections merely serve to reaffirm and legitimate state power no matter how one votes. In voting, you might initiate or overrule any policy, practice, or person except the system itself. For that reason the ruling class of a democratic government as a whole finds no real threat in suffrage, even though individual politicians might suffer public disfavor.

Many political historians have pointed out that government extended suffrage to disenfranchised groups during periods when it needed mass support to accomplish some end, usually militaristic, rather than during periods when the public demanded it most vocally. It's the classic, if ya wanna get a little, ya gotta give a little strategy. Furthermore, providing suffrage enabled the government to channel the energies of mass movements that might have posed a real challenge to state power into a safe form of action—voting—that reduced the speed and magnitude of the desired changes while simultaneously reproducing democracy. The major suffrage movements in the United States only succeeded in making races and women “free” from official marginalization to engage in a system of marginalization. As a result of their efforts, all United States citizens have an equal right to participate in an oppressive system and hope it works out in their favor. In fact, an astute observer would see any public debate about who can or cannot vote as a red herring. The government uses voting to mitigate minority demands and sap the energy building around direct action. Where there's smoke, there's fire, and where there's suffrage, there's motivated marginalization.

us to become better demagogues or lobbyists. Issues like campaign finance reform or subsidized media time are not interesting to us, because in recognizing the tyranny of political manipulation, we do not then seek to change things such that we can make this tyranny our own. Democracy only offers the choice of relieving yourself of oppression by becoming the oppressor—freedom lies in the entire institution’s abolition.

And of course, this entire process is open to out-and-out corruption. In the words of Stalin, “those who cast the votes decide nothing. Those who count the votes decide everything.”

The Reproduction of Democracy

Democracy is seen as the only legitimate form of expression or decision-making power with very little explanation of how or why that came to be. Humans today live in democracies or in countries under economic and militaristic dominion of democratic countries. Given these two options, it seems reasonable to conclude democracy means freedom and happiness. Here in the United States, democratic indoctrination begins with grade school elections, morning flag adoration, and sing-song pledges. However, the existence of one status quo does not negate the past or future existence of other conditions, and we should apply our critical thinking to the ways democracy posits itself as the necessary first condition of freedom.

When democracy frames our discussion and forces us to argue in its terms, all actions to change the socio-political environment must happen via its means and achieve only those ends it will sanction. For these reasons, democracy reproduces itself with very little special effort from the ruling class. A democratic system of “majority rule” encourages the alienated and exploited class to feel like they have control while it actually remains safely in the hands of the alienating and exploiting class. Even the most obvious contradictions get overlooked because the system has equated its existence with freedom and so places itself outside the realm of contestable ideas. By claiming itself as a priori or the first principle of individual and social liberty, democracy appears like a tolerant and pliable source of the public good beyond all scrutiny.

Meanwhile, the very notions of one-man—one-vote or “majority rule” imply that We the People have the power no matter how much evidence accumulates to the contrary. It follows logically that when The People don’t affect changes in our system, we must not want to change it. Hypothetically, we believe in justice, freedom, etc. or we would not have formed a democracy. Since we freedom-loving, democratic people would naturally act to end oppression as soon as we found it out, it follows that if a policy, law or practice does not change then it

existence of alienated power, since it requires that our desires be separate from our power to act, and any attempts to engage in that system will only serve to reproduce it. Democracies of any type make decisions via elections, the very essence of which transfers one’s will, thought, autonomy, and freedom to an outside power. It makes no difference whether one transfers that power to an elected representative or to an elusive majority. The point is that it’s no longer your own. Democracy has given it to the majority. You have been alienated from your capacity to determine the conditions of your existence in free cooperation with those around you.

There is an important distinction here. Parties are political in their claim to *represent* the interests of others. This is a claim to alienated power, because when someone takes power with a claim to represent me, I am separated from my own freedom to act. In this sense, anarchists are *anti-political*. We are not interested in a different claim to alienated power, in a different leadership, in another *form* of representation, in a regime change, or in anything that merely shuffles around the makeup of alienated power. Any time someone claims to represent you or to be your liberatory force, that should be a definite red flag. We are anti-political because we are interested in the self-organization of the power of individuals. This tension towards self-organization is completely orthogonal to democracy in any of its various forms.

Decontextualization As A Form Of Alienation

Second, decontextualization. Our critique of alienation is connected to problems with decontextualization, because in democracies, *decisions* are also alienated from the *contexts* in which they arise. Democracies require that laws, rules, and decisions be made separate from the circumstances that people find themselves in—thus forcing individuals into predetermined and reactive roles, rather than allowing for free-thinking individuals or groups of individuals to make decisions in various contexts at various times as they see fit.

To organize for a vote, the complexities of an issue, its causes and effects, and its possible resolutions get reduced to yes or no, either or, for or against. The questions are meaningless if the method is false: the process of reducing the issue at hand to that dichotomy isn’t democratic, and how could it be? By a pre-vote vote? That’s tried in some places, like the party primaries in the US or in run-off elections elsewhere, but even then the process functions to narrow the range of choices incrementally, as each round eliminates another candidate or option.

Opinions

Third, the opinion.

Democracy also demands the singular importance of “opinions.” Voters become

spectators in a process where they are presented with opinions to choose from, while in reality those who create the agendas are really in control. We've all seen the sloganeering and reductionism that occur when representatives or speakers reduce ideas down to sound-bite opinions to be chosen from.

The reduction of ideas to opinions for selection has a polarizing effect on those involved. When "selection" is the only method available, and there's nothing to do but choose from 'A' or 'B', the parties on either side of an issue push themselves apart and strengthen their mutual certainty of "rightness"—rather than acknowledging the complexity of issues, coming together for compromise, or seeking to find a common solution.

Voting strongly resembles the capitalist economic system that always accompanies democracy. There are producers who dictate the agenda, and there are consumers who spend most of their time in the role of spectator—choosing opinions from the marketplace of ideas. These choices also become a competitive game, and every decision will end with "winners" and "losers." It seems likely that this is part of the polarization that occurs with decision making in democracy—people solidify their positions and argue fiercely in part because their ideas have become contaminated with the desire to be seen as "right" or "winners" even if compromise or mutual agreement could have been possible.

Majorities

Fourth, majorities. Beyond questions of alienation, the creation of opinions, or the decontextualization of decisions, democracies have other real problems.

The concept of the "majority" is particularly troubling. By always accepting the will of the majority, democracy allows for majorities to have an absolute tyranny over everyone else. This means that in the winner-take-all context of democracy, minorities have no influence over decisions that are made. This is even worse than it seems, since the "majority" in any given situation is usually not even the majority of a population, but actually just the largest group of many minorities.

For a stable and consistent minority, this ever-present scenario means that democracies provide no more freedom than that of despotism or dictatorship.

By providing the illusion of participation for everyone, democracy allows majorities to justify their actions, no matter how oppressive. Since democracy makes the claim that everyone can participate in the political process, there is no harm in providing suffrage for groups with minority opinions, since their losing votes will only *justify* the contrary actions of a majority. Likewise, if individuals choose not to participate in a vote, their actions are still interpreted as a consent

of the majority opinion, since they *could* have voted against it if they'd wanted to. There is no escape.

Also, the one-person-one-vote model of democracy can not account for the strength of individual preference. Two voters who are casually interested in doing something against my dire opposition to it will win.

In this way, majorities offer very little opportunity to break from the status quo. In the words of Enrico Malatesta, a 19th century Italian anarchist: "The fact of having the majority on one's side does not in any way prove that one must be right. Indeed, humanity has always advanced through the initiative and efforts of individuals and minorities, whereas the majority is, by its very nature, conservative, slow, submissive to superior force and to established privileges."

Immanent Critiques

Fifth, immanent critiques.

We share a variety of widely acknowledged immanent critiques of democracy as well. These include susceptibility of democracies to demagoguery, lobbying, and corruption.

Demagoguery refers to a political strategy of obtaining a desired outcome or power by using rhetoric and propaganda to appeal to the prejudiced and reactionary impulses of the population. All forms of democracy fall prey to demagogues eager to seize any opportunity to advance their own aims by manufacturing consent from the momentary fear, hope, anger, and confusion of the general public.

On top of this, representational democracy has a special vulnerability to lobbying. Special interest groups send extremely well-paid people after elected representatives to persuade, threaten, barter or bribe them into delivering legislation, government funding, or other favors for their group. Because elected officials frequently come from industries, business sectors, religions and the upper class, they thus have many vested interests beyond the will of the people when they take office. Lobbyists can be quite successful in getting what they want.

These are also symptoms of problems that arise when individuals are turned into passive spectators in a decision making process, or when individual involvement in creating one's own environment is reduced to mere opinion-choosing. Unlike others who have identified problems with demagoguery and lobbying in democracies, we don't advocate for changes to democracy which would allow